

Ellis Island May 26, 1892

I had been standing for nearly an hour, and my feet were starting to hurt. I could feel a little trickle of sweat running down my back toward the two petticoats I had on; one linen and one wool, which I was wearing under two skirts. I was wearing most of what I owned so that I had less to carry. The little paper with my name and number on it and pinned to my shirt flapped lightly in the breeze off the ocean. At least I was outside and off the ship. I could see the Statue of Liberty in the harbor.

We had been anchored all night in her shadow and now we were finally on land. The ground appeared still, but my body felt it move like the ship, up and down and up and down. I sighed and closed my eyes. Even with my eyes closed I was aware of the huge crush of people around me, muttering with impatience at the slowness of the line and thrumming with excitement to finally be on land, and finally *here*. So many people together made my stomach knot.

Where would be a better place to spend a bright May day? Oh yes, tending the bees in their mad rush to plunder the blue-eyed Mary's, daisies, coltsfoot, and multitude of other flowers

that festooned the mountains that nestled the town of Soštanj in the Alps. I concentrated on imagining myself in their midst. The buzz of the huge crowd and the great multitude of languages faded into the pleasant hum of bees at work. I could feel my shoulders relaxing, tension easing at the memory of home on a spring day.

I concentrated until I could see the long wooden sides of the beehives that were painted eye-popping, brilliant colors. Panels with flowers, including one I had painted when I was eleven years old, were interspersed with panels that told stories. There was a panel with St. George (who resembled a tin can) killing a dragon resplendent with colorful scales and shooting flames. St. George was next to the panel with the God Perun flashing thunderbolts. If the priest thought it was St. Elijah that was fine; we knew it was Perun the great father God of Thunder. Next was St. Sebastian, loincloth clad and well-muscled leaning against a brilliant green tree. Blood flowed in lurid red from multiple protruding arrows.

Knowing my Aunt Sonya, who painted him, he was probably chosen as a subject because of his state of dress rather than his sainthood. I imagined bees crawling over his wounds and wondered if they remind him of the arrows. I thought of St. Sebastian as “St. Pincushion,” as he looked like the ball of felt seamstresses used to mercilessly stick with the tools of their trade. Perhaps St. Sebastian would be a better patron for seamstresses than for archers, since arrows had not been good to him.

I tried to stay with my imagination, to feel the sun on my face and the cool breeze of spring in the Alps. The smell made me lose my concentration. A fecund, pungent aroma of the ocean laced with seaweed and fish here at the shore contrasted with the pristine air of the Alps. Then there was the palpable emanation of humanity. I understood why the words inscribed under the great lady liberty standing in the harbor had called us the huddled masses.

After twenty days at sea in steerage I was pungent. My grimy hair with runaway pieces stuck to my neck under my kerchief. All the passengers were also unwashed and sweating in the heat. Contributing to the stench was the undertones of vomit from

those who had been seasick. I longed to wash my clothes after sharing a berth with my cousin Berta and her thirteen-year-old daughter, Jelka, who had both been seasick the entire journey. I had avoided them during the day by remaining on deck when weather allowed. At night I hugged the wall in our shared berth to be as far from them as possible. One of Granny Kopal's daughters opened a bag and pushed in another soiled diaper, adding to the general fetid atmosphere. The men squatted in front of us in the line smoking harsh little tobacco cigarettes to pass the time.

The line finally lumbered toward the huge brick building. I hoisted my bag and moved with the others. Move and stand, move and stand; slow going, but the movement was welcome and the sun was comforting. A guard's fierce dark eyes peered at the crowd over his nose that hooked almost to the bottom of his luxuriant mustache. Beside him stood a thin, almost frail, young man with sandy brown hair and glasses perched on the end of his nose. The guard said something in rapid English that we were unable to decipher. The young man with the glasses asked us in German if we wished to leave our luggage in the baggage area. One of the men in our group repeated what he said in Slovene for those who didn't speak German.

I gripped my valise tighter. It was a small bag since I had on most of the clothes that I owned. It held everything else I had brought with me from home and I didn't want to risk its loss in the great crowd. It held my prized possession: a quilt in bright flower colors that Aunt Sonya had made for me.

The guard was in a hurry to get people processed and seemed unconcerned with whether or not I lugged my gear, as long as I didn't slow the line. We went through the large doors and up the stairs, women to the left and men to the right. I glanced over my shoulder to see who was gasping as she climbed; it was one of the Polish women who had been too seasick to go to the deck the entire trip. Her wide brown eyes bulged from her gaunt, sallow face. At the top of the stairs I was stopped and a man I assumed to be a doctor inspected my eyes (turning up my eyelid with a little button hook) my hair, my face, my nails. He inspected in my mouth and I was grateful I still had all my teeth. He flicked his hand and motioned me forward. The Polish woman was still

breathing hard at the top of the stairs and the doctor listened to her chest with his stethoscope then wrote a *P* on her shirt in chalk. She cried and argued to no avail and was turned toward a side room. She wouldn't get in. I was halted again to roll up my sleeve to have my arm poked for the smallpox vaccination.

The line turned and we entered the great hall as large as the main train station in Vienna with brick walls and open floors that smelled faintly of disinfectant and a cathedral-like vaulted ceiling. In this cathedral thousands of people were fervently praying to pass the next inspection. The babble of voices and the crush of humanity were overwhelming. Metal rails funneled the multitudes into lines that snaked back and forth like a mountain trail. The goal here was not the top of the mountain; it was the immigration inspector.

The line bumped along in an irregular rhythm: *move, wait, move, wait*. After two hours Granny Kobal was sitting resignedly on the floor, wilted from the heat of wearing too many clothes in a building with too many people. I waved to a young blond man in the dark jacket with brass buttons sported by the immigration officials. He nodded pleasantly and came over.

In my best English I said, "Sir, water?"

He took a moment to decode my English. Finally, his eyes lightened and he said, "A drink huh?" while pantomiming lifting a glass to his mouth. I nodded enthusiastically. He lumbered off and came back in a few moments swinging a lovely bucket of water. We women stood back respectfully as the men with us made haste to come to drink. The official raised his eyebrows and he stepped in front of the bucket. "Ladies first, no?" We stood, unsure. *Ladies first?* Was this an American joke? Men were more important and always went first.

Granny Kobal was the first to regain her composure. She walked to the bucket, dipped the dipper and raised it in a toast "To America, where women are first" then drank enthusiastically. We laughed nervously and eyed the men as we drank, unsure how *ladies first* would play out in the future. The men seemed as confused as we were as they resigned themselves to the strangeness of America and waited for us to finish.

After another hour I apprehensively approached the high stool where the inspector sat to decide my fate. He ran his hand

through his graying hair, obviously not for the first time that day, peered at me over his glasses and, thankfully in German, asked me for my papers. I had been a maid in Vienna and was fluent in German as well as my native Slovenian. His questions were rapid fire and I struggled to answer with a steady voice.

“Name?”

“Irena Marija Prešeren.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Are you single or married?”

“Single.”

“What is your occupation?”

“Servant.”

He paused and examined me carefully. All the notices for emigration to America had lengthy warnings that women would not be allowed to emigrate for purposes of prostitution. His eyes slid quickly over my unremarkable features without comment. His careful perusal took in my serviceable clothing that obscured my minimal curves. I think my rough hands were what settled his mind that I had not lied about being a servant.

“Can you read and write?”

“Yes.”

He stopped again as if surprised by my answer and considered me for a moment to see if I was telling the truth. I just stared back, ready to demonstrate if needed. One good thing about Slovenia being ruled by Austria—compulsory elementary school. I had five years of school. I could read and write had a good head for figures too. The inspector seemed satisfied after a short minute and resumed his questions.

“What country are you from?”

“Austria.”

“What is your race?”

“Slovenian.”

“What is the name and address of a relative from your native country?”

I gulped back a sudden rush of tears at the thought of my mother back home and answered as calmly as I could, “Brina Kravos, Soštanj, Austria.”

“What’s your final destination in America?”

“Cheyenne, Wyoming.”

His eyebrows raised, “Why Wyoming?”

“Papa and my husband-to-be have an eatery. I go to cook.”

His gaze shifted sharply to my face as if still trying to figure out if I were a woman of good character. I flipped through my papers to a note written in English.

January 21, 1892

From W.G. Angus Sherriff of Johnson County

On behalf of Mr. Blaž Grom & Mr. Ciril Jakopič

Mr. Ciril Jakopič, father of Irena Marie Prešeren, is the proprietor of Jakopič Eatery in Cheyenne, WY. This is a reputable business with pretty darn good food. Mr. Blaž Grom works at this establishment. Mr. Jakopič's daughter Catherine also works there. It is my understanding that Mr. Grom has paid for Miss Irena Marie Prešeren's passage from Soštanj, Austria with the intent to marry her. Miss Prešeren will be employed by her father. Please let her come and cook since I enjoy eating at Ciril's place and he could use the help.

Signed

W.G. Angus

The inspector ran his finger over the official seal on the bottom and grunted.

“How much money do you have with you?”

I showed him twenty-five dollars American. I also had two gold coins sewed in the hem of my dress, which I kept to myself.

“And how are you going to get to Wyoming?”

“I go to Cleveland with my cousin. Blaž will meet me and marry me in Cleveland.”

He looked to my cousin Berta's husband, Matevž, who had finally joined us in line. Where had he been? Matevž nodded in agreement signaling that he would travel with me. Finally, the inspector moved on to the questions about American history. We had studied these from a little well-worn pamphlet, so I was well-prepared and even able to answer in English. He stamped my papers and I felt my knees go weak. I was through

the process; they were going to let me into America. Matevž went next, readily answering questions for himself, Jelka, and her ten-year-old brother Tomo. I didn't see Berta or their six-year-old son Josef. *Where could they be?* Matevž's papers were stamped in minutes. It was easier for a man to pass inspection than it was for a single woman. He and Berta were going to join Berta's brother and his wife in Cleveland and work for them in their general store. Matevž's face was solemn and grave even as his papers were stamped. Jelka's lower lip was trembling. Tomo looked ready to cry.

"Where are Berta and Josef?"

"He could not say his name or answer the doctor's questions. He cannot come. She will go back with him and I go to Cleveland with Jelka and Tomo."

Matevž and Berta had hoped that because Josef was small for his age the physician would simply think that he was young and shy and let him pass without answering the questions for children. I knew that Josef's only word was a garbled "mama." He was not just slow; he was retarded.

"We had to try, no? I will work and make money and maybe Josef can stay with Berta's parents and maybe she can come later. Or maybe I will go back when Jelka and Tomo are settled." His shoulders drooped a little. "We can't all go home now, can we?" I knew as well as he did that there was nothing to go back to. He had sold what little he had and here we were. Besides, the shipping company would only pay return passage for those who weren't able to get into the country. If Matevž wanted to go home with Jelka and Tomo he would have to pay passage for the three of them. With what money?

"Matevž I'm so sorry."

He cleared his throat, straightened his shoulders and gestured to Jelka and Tomo.

"Yeah, well, come along, we say goodbye to Mama and Josef and get our train tickets to Cleveland."